

DEVOLVED MANAGEMENT OF SCHOOLS AND FE COLLEGES: A VICTORY FOR THE PRODUCER OVER THE CONSUMER?

Pamela Munn

Introduction

Reform of local government in Scotland, and, indeed, in the rest of the UK is on the political agenda. The failure of the poll tax has opened up questions not only about how local government is best financed but also about its structure and functions. The Conservative party is currently advocating single-tier authorities as more efficient and less bureaucratic than the present system and, were Labour to win the next general election and establish a Scottish Assembly, Scotland's local government structure would be bound to change. It is generally accepted, for example, that Strathclyde region, encompassing about half of Scotland's population, would be an inappropriate entity in the context of a National Assembly. It seems, therefore, safe to assume that, whichever party is in power after the next general election, the structure of local government will undergo change, even if the precise nature of these structural changes is, at present, unclear.

The focus of this article is less upon local government structures, however, than upon its functions in relation to education, the largest single item of local authority expenditure. The article considers current developments in the devolved management of schools and further education (FE) colleges and implications of these for local authorities and for the Scottish Office Education Department (SOED). It argues that under the rhetoric of greater direct accountability to customers, namely parents and local employers, central government control of schools and colleges is being increased. It sees education authorities as agents of central government in this process and speculates about the room for manoeuvre authorities will have to set their own stamp upon priorities. Finally, the article considers some of the possible consequences for education authorities of the devolved management of schools and colleges.

The approach to devolved management for schools and FE colleges has a number of common features, notably an emphasis on a strategic planning role for education authorities and a belief that school and college based management systems are closer to the level at which needs are expressed and are, therefore, more likely to be responsive to those needs than a remote and expensive bureaucracy, the education authority. The particular devolved management systems for each sector are rather different, however, and so they are considered separately below.

Before doing so, it is important to remember that devolved management of schools and colleges is taking place in a climate where market forces are believed by the Conservative government to be powerful agents in bringing about school and college improvement and in raising educational standards. As such, education is a good example of the shift in the balance between individual rights and collective welfare rights in the public services. Since 1979, when a Conservative government was returned to power, users of public services have been granted rights, as part of a general reaction against what the government perceived to be the failure of the providers of the services to deal effectively with social problems. In education, comprehensive schools were seen by commentators of varying political, social and educational opinions⁽¹⁾ to have failed to raise standards sufficiently and, more fundamentally, to represent the failure of the social democratic reformism of British education policy since the 1944 Act⁽²⁾ which had given prominence to a collective welfare orientation. In other words the dominance of the producer, education authorities, over the consumer, parents, had failed to reduce inequalities in pupils' attainment associated with social economic status, to provide equality of educational opportunity and to manage resources effectively. This dismissal of the comprehensive system has been challenged⁽³⁾ but, our concern is less with competing claims about the effectiveness of comprehensive schools, than with their role as a catalyst in promoting consumer or user rights at the expense of producer rights in the area of schooling. In any discussion of consumers and producers, it is important to be clear who they are. In the school system, government sees parents (acting as guardians of their children's interests) as consumers, while schools and education authorities, and, of course, government itself, are producers. We may note in passing the general neglect of the wider community interest in schooling in this formulation, a neglect which is reflected in the composition of school boards, as we shall see below.

Parents' right to choose the school their children attend, introduced in Scotland in 1981⁽⁴⁾, was the first step in encouraging producers, this time schools, rather than education authorities, to compete with each other for customers. The rhetoric which surrounded the Bill as it was going through Parliament stressed the beneficial effects of consumerism on a 'nationalised industry', the opportunities for disadvantaged families to escape from the deprived areas in which they were trapped and the opportunities for schools to develop their own distinctive ethos and curricular strengths. It is interesting that the emphasis on curriculum diversity was later toned down⁽⁵⁾ as the reality now is that schools compete in providing the same *curriculum product*, not by offering parents diversity. The introduction of a national curriculum in all but name in Scottish primary and secondary schools, national testing and assessment, the publication of schools' examination results and the introduction of national performance indicators all signify the criteria against which schools are intended to be judged. As we shall see below, there are opportunities for schools to offer diversity in teaching and learning processes and, of course, each school has its own distinctive ethos. Just how far such diversity of process can continue under the new system of national testing is a

matter of some debate⁽⁶⁾. It is rather as if all motor car manufacturers were competing to produce exactly the same model in terms of performance, particular outcomes such as emission requirements, speed and braking distances, gear ratios and so on were pre-specified, but they were free to choose their own design and colour.

FE colleges have fewer constraints on curriculum provision, and are being encouraged to undertake market research before embarking on the provision of new courses. Like schools, however, student numbers are crucial to their funding. Whether colleges will compete with each other in providing the same courses for which they believe there is a large market or attempt to carve up the market by specialising in particular fields remains to be seen.

Devolved management, then, so the argument goes, provides the opportunity for schools and colleges to sink or swim by their own efforts. Does it? Let us turn first to the devolved management of schools.

School boards' powers

The School Boards (Scotland) Act⁽⁷⁾ came into force on 1 April 1989. The Act provides for every local authority school in Scotland (except nursery schools) to have a school board. Latest figures show that 2,348 schools throughout Scotland now have boards, a total number which means that 96% of secondaries, 80% of primaries and 47% of special schools now have boards⁽⁸⁾. The Act gives primacy to parents as board members. Although there are various categories of membership, teacher, co-opted and parental, the statutory composition of boards is such that parents are in the majority. Not only are they the largest single group; they outnumber all other categories of membership combined. Thus if a matter came to a vote at a board, all parent members, if present and if voting together, could prevail over any other combination of membership. The precise number of board members in each category depends on the number of pupils on roll. Table 1 gives details.

TABLE 1: Composition of Boards

	Number of pupils			
	1-500	501-1000	1001-1500	1500+
Parent members	4	5	6	7
Staff members	1	2	2	3
Co-opted members	2	2	3	3

Note: Single teacher schools will have 3 parents and 2 co-opted members but no staff members since the single teacher is the headteacher.

It should be noted that the headteacher is principal professional adviser to the board, not a member, and that the Director of Education or his nominee

has the right to attend and speak at meetings, as does the Regional or Islands Councillor in whose ward the school is situated.

Boards for individual schools have been in existence only a short time in Scotland, unlike school governing bodies south of the border where the 1980 Education Act⁽⁹⁾ ensured that each school would have its own governing body. Perhaps their shorter life in Scotland goes some way to explaining the rather more limited powers assigned to them than those conferred on governing bodies in England and Wales by the 1988 Education Act⁽¹⁰⁾. Governing bodies in England and Wales have powers to hire and fire school staff, for example, and extensive powers over the general financial management of schools, with local education authorities statutorily bound to devolve at least 85% of their budgets to their schools by 1993⁽¹¹⁾. In contrast school boards' functions are:

- to promote contact between the school, parents and the community and encourage the formation of a parent-teacher or parents' association
- to approve the headteacher's plans for use of the capitation allowance (typically the budget for books, stationery, equipment etc)
- to participate in the selection of senior promoted staff
- to control the use of school premises outwith school hours
- to set occasional holidays during term time
- to receive advice and reports from the headteacher and, in particular, an annual report which includes a report on the aggregated level of pupil attainment
- to have any matter raised by the Board considered by the headteacher and education authority
- to receive information from the education authority about education in the area including statements about past and intended expenditure on schools⁽¹²⁾.

Government pronouncements about the aims and purposes of boards stress three main functions, the greater involvement of **parents** in schools affairs, closer **community** involvement with schools and freeing of **education authorities** progressively from the business of routine school administration.

Are school boards likely to fulfil the functions which SOED has in mind? We can answer this question at two levels: through considering the general powers and duties of boards against the claims which are being made about the overall purposes of boards; and through such limited research evidence as we have about the ways in which boards are operating.

Are school boards a victory for the producer over the consumer?

A glance at the functions specified for school boards reveals the very limited nature of their formal powers. Unlike the parental choice legislation giving primacy to a parent's right to choose the school attended by his or her children, and so shifting power from the producers to the consumer, school boards are more difficult to place on the continuum of individual welfare and collective welfare rights. Boards are not education producers or providers. Their rights and responsibilities make that clear. In the area of a school's professional concerns, such as curriculum, assessment, homework, discipline and so on, school boards have the power to ask questions, monitor performance and make representations. These are important powers and open up possibilities for boards to exert influence and pressure not only on schools and education authorities but also, as we shall see below, on central government itself. However, boards have no decision-making powers in these areas. Indeed, the areas under the direct control of boards are sparse, involving administrative rather than educational matters. Although few would deny the need to have efficient administration of school lets and of the setting of occasional holidays, these areas are hardly the life blood of schools. Boards' powers in the area of school finance are also limited, concentrating, at least at the time of writing, on giving approval to headteachers' plans for buying books and equipment. Even where regions, such as Strathclyde and Dumfries and Galloway, are experimenting with greater devolution of financial management to schools, the role of boards is minor in Dumfries and Galloway⁽¹³⁾ and non-existent in Strathclyde⁽¹⁴⁾. It is the headteacher who is intended to be the real decision-maker on school finances under both these schemes. Rather, boards are somewhat analogous to consumer associations. They have legitimate interests in schooling as parents. The government assumption is that these consumer interests are better served by groups of parents operating through boards as opposed to individual parent pressure on schools. However, in many ways the rights of producers dominate.

If we see central government as the ultimate producer of the public education service, then it is clear that collective welfare concerns override the rights and responsibilities of boards. If we define running schools as making-decisions about what is to be taught, how pupils' learning is to be assessed, how many and what kinds of teachers are to be employed and the kinds of pupils to be admitted, it is clear that boards have almost no part to play. These strategic areas of decision-making about the curriculum, assessment, minimum staffing levels and admission policies are all firmly in the hands of the Scottish Office. Just how firmly curriculum and assessment policy is centrally controlled can be gauged by the detailed guidance on curriculum content and attainment targets issued under the 5-14 Programme⁽¹⁵⁾. This Programme specifies what children between the ages of 5 and 14 should be taught, sets out attainment targets against which children's learning should be assessed and intends to monitor national standards of attainment through national testing of children in

Primary 4 and Primary 7 in mathematics and reading and writing. The national Standard Grade examinations at 16, administered by the Scottish Examination Board, are seen as effectively controlling the curriculum of 14-16 year olds.

Boards' powers to ask the education authority for information on almost any educational matter, and especially their power to ask for an annual report from the headteacher, can be seen as making these education producers more accountable and as shifting the balance towards an explicit recognition of the legitimacy of consumers' interests. The government's suggestion that boards should ask headteachers for reports about the school curriculum and about the level of pupil attainment, imply, however, that boards are to perform a monitoring role for the government. That is, boards are intended to act as the government's agents ensuring that schools are kept up to the mark. In other words, the producer, government, tells the consumers, boards, what their interest should be. This is the intended role for boards. Is it the one which they have been playing? Such limited evidence as we have suggests that boards are developing roles in ways not anticipated by the government.

Evidence from the pilot school boards set up by Dumfries and Galloway a year in advance of the first statutory boards⁽¹⁶⁾ and from observation of a number of meetings of the statutory boards⁽¹⁷⁾ reveals that board members tend to be strongly supportive of their schools. This support took the form of explicit statements of support, such as 'this school is a great wee school' but perhaps more revealingly in a marked reluctance to challenge the headteacher. Headteachers have been assiduous in providing reports on various aspects of school life often suggesting that these appear as items on the agenda, and the tendency of boards is to note these reports with very little discussion of their content and very little cross-examination of the headteacher. Of course, it is impossible to generalise from the small number of boards which have been observed to all school boards in Scotland. However, the evidence is consistent with larger scale surveys of parental views⁽¹⁸⁾ which reveal a general trust in the professional expertise of teachers and a belief that schools are doing a good job. So boards have not acted as thorns in the schools' flesh; rather they have been harnessed to support schools and to put pressure on education authorities for more resources for schools.

Perhaps this was a role which government did expect boards to play, challenging education authority policy and practice. In contrast to the reluctance to challenge their headteachers, boards have had few inhibitions about cross-examining education authority officials about financial allocations to schools and the rationale for these allocations. Boards are sympathetic to headteachers' concerns about the lack of money for books and equipment and are generally shocked at the low level of per capita allocation, especially in primary schools. The lack of spending on school maintenance, repairs and decoration is highly visible to board members whose meetings are typically held in the school and who tour school premises from time to time as part of their duties. The need for parents to subsidise educational visits has also been

raised.

Less visible to boards is the quality of the day-to-day teaching and learning in schools. Nevertheless, the general trust in teachers' professional expertise, and the traditional view of education in Scotland as a collective welfare right for all, have been reflected in boards' suspicions of government policy enabling individual schools to opt out of local authority control. Boards' concerns that opting out might lead to a two-tier state education service, to some extent lie behind the fact that no school in Scotland has yet opted out.

Perhaps the most striking and unexpected (by government) role adopted by boards has been to collaborate with schools and teachers in opposition to national testing. It is ironic that government, having explicitly set out to create a parental voice in school affairs, through parental choice and school boards, has had to live with the consequences of this voice being raised in opposition to its own policies and in support of schools. Boards have, in effect, supported one kind of education producer, schools, against another, government. The most telling evidence of this opposition has been the large scale boycotting of national testing by parents through withdrawing their children from pilot tests in April 1991⁽¹⁹⁾. In this boycott, parents had the explicit support of the largest teaching union, the Educational Institute of Scotland and the, sometimes, more tacit support of the education authorities. It is also ironic that boards may subvert the government's market forces approach to school improvement by banding together in a national federation. Moves are already underway to develop such a federation and regional federations of boards already exist, Lothian being one example. It seems probable that such a federation would try to exert pressure on national government rather than regional authorities on education issues. As with poll tax opposition, pressure will be brought to bear where real power and responsibility lies, central government, rather than on implementors of policy, education authorities and schools.

Thus school boards have challenged the producer power of the government in education and to a lesser extent that of local authorities. They have not challenged the producer power of schools and teachers. Rather, they have supported schools.

If school boards prove unable or unwilling to perform the monitoring role envisaged for them by government, what other avenues are available in the context of a government commitment to devolved management of schools? Two are looming large on the horizon, performance indicators for schools and school development plans.

Performance indicators

Performance indicators are essentially items of information provided at regular intervals designed to track the performance of a system. To be helpful, indicators have to provide valid and reliable measurement of a system's

performance, and have to report on key features of the system. Just as tests of pupils, indicators concentrate attention on what is to be measured and divert attention from areas which are not. SOED intends to produce a guide to the performance indicators used by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) in inspecting schools. These indicators are likely to cover four main areas of school life – curriculum, the quality of teaching and learning including pupils' examination performance, accommodation and use of resources. Under each of these areas there will be a number of descriptive statements about specific aspects and illustrations of different levels of performance. It is expected that schools will be measured on a four-level criterion-referenced scale from 'unsatisfactory' to 'good' although all four levels will not be exemplified in the guide.

The guide is intended to help schools and education authorities monitor their own performance by making explicit the criteria used by HMI, and schools are encouraged to extend the list provided and to develop their own indicators reflecting their own local circumstances. It is too early to say how the indicators will be used, whether schools and education authorities will have opportunities to develop their own indicators, how evidence about school performance will be collected and what the consequences for poorly performing schools will be. Nor is it clear whether all areas of a school's performance are viewed as equally important. Is a school's efficient use of accommodation as important as the public examination results of its pupils, for example? Whether a school's score will be publicly available through school boards to parents is also unclear. If it is, the challenge is to present the information in a valid and reliable way and in a way that makes sense to parents. The debate about how to present a school's effect on the attainment of pupils, and the need to differentiate attainment (what a child is likely to achieve given his/her home background) and progress (the effect of a school on a child's learning), illustrates the difficulty of presenting clear and understandable information about a school's performance⁽²⁰⁾.

One consequence of the emergence of performance indicators for authorities is likely to be a much greater emphasis in monitoring the quality of schools. Indeed, Strathclyde has already established a quality assurance unit and has recruited education authority inspectors to monitor schools' performance and promote school improvement. In other authorities, the traditional role of the subject adviser to encourage and support subject-specific developments across all schools, and to provide in-service training for subject specialists, is disappearing. A picture is beginning to emerge whereby advisers have responsibilities for specific schools, and their role is to audit the school's performance against national and/or education authority criteria, encourage school self-evaluation and support the production of a school development plan. Presumably, advisers will also encourage and support the agreed development priorities in the plan.

School Development Plans

Hand in hand with performance indicators go school development plans. In many ways these are similar to corporate plans, requiring schools to identify priorities for development, set targets and evaluate their success in attaining those targets. An agreed school development plan is seen as a contract between the education authority and its school. Each school is likely to have its own individual and distinctive plan and in that sense offer diversity to potential customers. Both national and education authority guides to development planning are now in existence and they stress its benefits in terms of managing change, coping with competing demands on schools and ordering priorities. Whether such benefits will accrue largely depends on schools' freedom to identify their own priorities, and to specify the number of developments they feel able to take forward in any one academic year. The national and regional guides to development planning stress that priorities for development have to be chosen by taking national and regional priorities into account as well as the school's particular circumstances. This assumes good advance knowledge of these priorities and hence national and regional education development plans. Whether national and regional priorities will be identified, and whether incompatibility can be resolved remain to be seen.

Just as school boards have had unintended consequences for government, creating a parental lobby in support of schools, school development planning may also have unintended consequences. By encouraging schools to identify priorities, albeit within national and regional frameworks, set targets, identify the resources necessary to meet the targets and specify success criteria, national and local government are providing schools with a potentially powerful negotiating weapon. Schools will be in a much better position than hitherto to articulate their main areas of endeavour and the resource implications of these. Furthermore, by agreeing that a school's development plan is acceptable, the education authority may find it difficult to persuade schools to take on additional priorities during the course of the academic year. Skilful headteachers will be able to expose the competing demands on schools, and gain parental support for the school's development plan against additional demands for developments from either central or local government. Thus a system for the central control of schools through performance indicators and agreed school development plans may provide schools with more room for manoeuvre than seems likely at first sight.

Implications of devolved management of schools for education authorities

What are the likely consequences of devolved management of schools for education authorities? Paradoxically, one short-term consequence has been an increased workload. The existence of school boards has led to the establishment of school board units in each authority whose remit is to act as a channel of communication between the boards and the authority, provide training opportunities for board members and generally act as troubleshooters⁽²¹⁾.

The units vary in size and are staffed at varying levels of seniority. Most either have direct access to senior officials through the unit head or are themselves headed by an Assistant Director of Education.

A second short term consequence already mentioned has been to make authorities more directly accountable to parents through school boards. New financial management systems, identifying schools as individual cost centres, have enabled boards and headteachers to compare schools' budgets. Boards have been unpleasantly surprised at the low levels of per capita allocations to schools and, as mentioned above, have not been slow to ask for detailed explanations of budgetary allocations. Comparisons with neighbouring school budgets have had similar effects. Education authorities, therefore, are likely to be confronted with demands from school boards for additional resources for 'their' schools. Inevitably, some boards will be more skilled and successful in pressing these demands than others and so school boards may increase inequality in educational provision. We must wait and see whether boards, through a national federation, represent parental views about the generality of schooling, or devote their energies only to their own schools. There is clearly the possibility of confrontations between boards and education authorities, the former having responsibility and loyalty to a particular school, and the latter having responsibilities for all schools in the region.

A longer term consequence for education authorities is likely to be less concentration on the minutiae of financial management and a far greater devolution of budgets to schools. The experiments already under way in Strathclyde and Dumfries & Galloway give headteachers greater control over some aspects of the school budget such as staffing costs, repairs and maintenance and supplies and services. It is interesting that these experimental schemes devolve decision making to the headteacher not the school board. In the context of greater devolution of financial management the role of the education authority is to provide central services such as that provided by educational psychologists, teachers of children with special educational needs, advisers and the like. Either such services might be 'bought' by schools according to the headteacher's perception of need, or an authority might decide to retain a proportion of the education budget to provide a specified level of such services in all schools. The increasing financial autonomy of schools in England and Wales, and the Education Minister, Mr Forsyth's, enthusiastic account of the local management of schools in New Zealand, following a visit there in April 1991⁽²²⁾, strongly suggest that the Conservative Party intends that Scottish schools are to have greater control of their budgets. Whether this control will be exercised by the headteacher or school board remains to be seen.

Education authorities are in a difficult position to say the least. If they act as government's agents and concentrate on easily quantifiable performance indicators and uncritically accept development priorities, they risk alienating schools and parents. If they develop their own performance indicators and

development plan in negotiation with schools they risk alienating government and being scrapped to be replaced by an administering authority with no party political clout, or indeed, schools being directly administered by SOED. The recent proposals for removal of FE colleges from local authority control illustrate the vulnerability of education as a local authority function at a time when local government finance is being reviewed and education is the most expensive local government function.

Further education colleges and devolved management

Under the Self-Governing Schools etc (Scotland) Act 1989⁽²³⁾, considerable autonomy was given to FE colleges. In brief, education authorities must delegate the management, supervision and financial control of colleges to college councils. College councils, composed largely of employers, although also having at least one representative each from teaching staff, non-teaching staff and students, have substantial powers and much greater powers than school boards. For example, the college council may:

- draw up the college's programme of courses
- decide the qualifications which each course should aim to cover
- run short courses in response to market needs
- decide such matters as the minimum class size to make a course viable
- select and discipline staff (though not dismiss staff)
- determine the staffing complement and grade of college staff
- undertake commercial activities and set up companies.

Functions retained by the education authority include:

- deciding the range of subjects to be provided by each college
- entering into employment contracts with college staff
- dismissing staff
- ownership of college property and major maintenance and repair
- taking action against the college principal.

All education authorities have had to draw up schemes of delegation specifying the powers devolved to college councils and those retained by the local authority.

The considerable power delegated to college councils is constrained in three main ways. First, a college council must submit a college development plan to their education authority each year. The plan, which must cover the next three academic years, has to include a number of components, for example, the number of students expected to be on roll, the courses to be provided, proposed activities other than courses, and estimates of income and expenditure. The college plan must be approved by the education authority which may modify it before approval and the college council must have regard

to the approved plan in exercising its functions. Secondly, the college council has to submit a report each year to the education authority and make it available to the public. While the content and format of the report is seen as matter for local decision, it seems likely that the report will be, at least in part, a statement of the extent to which the college development plan is being achieved. Furthermore, the existence of national performance indicators for colleges suggests that reports will contain information on:

- student success ratio, ie the proportion of students who obtain a qualification
- post-course success ratio (ie progression to employment or more advanced education)
- quality of teaching and learning
- unit costs
- staff-student ratios
- use of teaching accommodation⁽²⁴⁾.

Thirdly, college courses which are certificated by public bodies have to meet specific criteria. Thus colleges, all of which offer National Certificates and/or Higher National Certificates, and/or Higher National Diplomas, for instance, have their provision, teaching methods and assessment monitored and validated by the Scottish Vocational Education Council (SCOTVEC). While SCOTVEC's monitoring role will continue, it is less easy to predict what, if anything, will replace the role of the education authorities. The sudden announcement that FE colleges were to be removed from all local authority control was accompanied by a statement setting up an administering authority for all FE colleges in England and Wales. No such authority has yet been mooted for Scotland although the establishment of the Scottish Further Education Unit⁽²⁵⁾ to provide better support to further education colleges in implementing the Government's recent reforms of college management may be the precursor to a Scottish equivalent of the English arrangements. A particular function of the Unit is supporting college quality assurance systems. It may be, however, that given the developments in Scottish central institutions, and the proposals to transfer administration of the central institutions and the Scottish Universities to a Scottish funding council, a new Scottish body administering all Scottish tertiary education will emerge.

Whatever the eventual system devised for the national administration of FE colleges, does their greater autonomy represent a victory for the consumer over the producer? The answer to this question depends on who counts as a consumer. College councils, having many more statutory rights and responsibilities for education and training provision than school boards, could be seen as a replacement for the education authority, albeit with a different membership composition. Thus, it could be argued, college councils as responsible for educational provision are producers. Power remains even more firmly in the hands of producers if we speculate about the way in which councils are likely to operate. College principals are now designated as chief

executives and it is likely that they will exercise real power. Although no research has yet been undertaken on college councils, it seems unlikely that a group of lay council members will play a formative role in drawing up a college development plan. It is probable that plans will be prepared by senior college managers, and presented to college councils for approval. In at least one college, the sub-committee of the council dealing with development planning spent 20 minutes on the plan which had been prepared by senior staff, with almost no debate and discussion. Just as with schools, there seems to be considerable trust in the professional expertise of college staff to get on with the job. The likely way for consumer power to be exercised is via student enrolments for the courses provided by particular colleges as funding follows students.

Conclusion

The accountability of public services has been a prominent issue in British politics at least since the 1970s with dramatic economic decline and the supposed failure of the education system to deliver an educated, adaptable and productive workforce. Although all the legislation designed to increase educational accountability has been enacted under a Conservative government it is worth remembering that it was a Labour Prime Minister, James Callaghan, who signalled concern about the falling standards in England in his famous Ruskin College speech of 1976 and initiated the so-called 'Great Debate' about education which found formal expression in a Consultative Paper, *Education in Schools*⁽²⁶⁾. What distinguishes the Conservative approach to accountability of the public services is the ideology of market forces. In schools this has been operationalised by conceptualising individual parents as consumers with the right to choose which schools their children will attend, and by giving schools the right to opt out of local authority control. Giving FE colleges considerable autonomy to run their own affairs is the most recent measure to make provision more responsive to the needs of customers by removing the protection of a remote bureaucracy, the education authority.

School boards, however, do not devolve power and decision making. Indeed government is attempting to increase control of schools through curriculum and assessment policy, performance indicators and school development planning. Involving parents in the running of schools through school boards is largely a cosmetic exercise when key areas of curriculum, assessment, staffing, admissions and most finance is outwith boards' power. Boards are intended by government to monitor their schools' adherence to government policy, hence school development plans, and to keep a check on standards, hence national testing and performance indicators.

Even when power has been devolved to the consumer, it is more apparent than real. Certainly, in urban areas, parents exercise their rights to choose schools for their children, with up to 25% doing so in some places but, in large

parts of the country, geography dictates the school to be attended. The government intends that schools which underperform improve their performance, through market forces, or suffer the consequences of falling rolls. Whatever one's opinion of this approach to school improvement, what has been striking has been parental support of schools and parental trust in the professional expertise of teachers. The government has created a parental lobby which, up until the present, has supported schools against government policy, most notably on national testing. One can predict that the parental lobby will be equally vocal if schools are given greater financial autonomy, and that there will be increased pressure on government for extra resources for schools. Headteachers and their staff will build on parents' trust by providing information on their priorities, the rationale for their priorities and their implications for the generality of school work. Parents will have the opportunity as never before to understand the demands on schools and are likely to support schools rather than education authorities or central government.

Predictions about FE are more difficult. The undoubtedly greater autonomy devolved to colleges and the creation of college councils to manage college affairs also suggests power for producers, especially as colleges are likely to have to report to a monitoring body of some sort, in terms decided by government. Furthermore, the day-to-day management of colleges and the preparation and implementation of college development plans seem likely to remain in the hands of front-line producers, college principals and senior staff.

The future of education authorities is unclear. It seems likely that some administrative unit will be needed to monitor standards and quality. One possibility is that the unit will be new single tier authorities with local politicians exercising power and influence on schools. Another possibility is that the unit will be devoid of any political representation and report directly to SOED. Alternatively, such a unit might report directly to a Scottish Assembly which would also have responsibility for further and higher education. We must wait and see.

Pamela Munn, Depute Director, The Scottish Council for Research in Education, Edinburgh.

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